



Calle Ocho and the Embargo: The Evolution of Cuban American Views on US-Cuba Policy

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Theme: This ARI analyses the influence of Hispanics on American foreign policy by focusing on the important role that Cuban Americans have played in maintaining a hallmark policy of the United States in fighting Communism: the Cuban Embargo

Summary: What is commonly called the 'Cuban Embargo' is a 45-year old policy that has roots in the US 'Containment' policy of the late 40s and 50s. Cuban exiles benefited enormously from the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act that gave them a fast track to US citizenship and opened the door for their eventual entry into Florida politics and on the national stage. Jorge Mas Canosa founded the Cuban American National Foundation in 1981, which became a leading force in shaping Cuba policy throughout the Reagan, Bush Sr. and Clinton Administrations.

As Florida's importance in presidential elections has risen, Cuban Americans have used their leading role in South Florida to ensure that candidates of both parties take into account their views on Cuba policy. With Mas Canosa's death in 1997, and in the aftermath of Elián González's return to Cuba in 2000, according to public opinion polls, Cuban Americans have become more fragmented in their politics and, concurrently, 'mainstream' America has become more vocal about wanting changes to the embargo.

Both President Bush and his challenger John Kerry are campaigning hard in Florida, which was won by President Bush by 537 votes in 2000. Both candidates are taking a firm stance on Cuba in the campaign but continuing interest from Congress, US business, farmers, and others will likely cause whichever administration is in place in 2005 to focus on the policy. It must be remembered that the embargo is only one aspect of a comprehensive policy that seeks to encourage a rapid, peaceful transition in Cuba to a democratic government characterised by open markets and respect for human rights. It is a safe bet that Cuban Americans will play a very constructive role in shaping a future policy conducive to these goals.

Analysis: *Birth of a 45-year Old Policy*

The policies and economic measures that emerged into what is known commonly as the 'Cuban Embargo' developed long before the terms *Cuban American* and *Hispanics* entered our politically correct lexicon¹. The Eisenhower Administration, incensed over the 1959 Agrarian Reform Law in Cuba that severely limited land holdings and compensation for expropriations, angry at the nationalisation of the US-operated telephone company, and alarmed at the increasing Communist tilt of young Fidel Castro (which included re-establishing diplomatic relations with the USSR, severed by Batista in 1952) took the first steps to impose a partial economic embargo on Cuba in October 1960. In rapid succession, the newly-minted Kennedy Administration between 1961 and 1963 tightened

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¹ And it is an 'embargo' and not a 'blockade' as the Cuban Government repeatedly, and falsely, claims. European media and politicians unfortunately too often uncritically accept the word 'blockade'.

the embargo, culminating in July 1963 with the Cuban Assets Control Regulations under the Trading With the Enemy Act that prohibited travel to Cuba and made financial and commercial transactions with Cuba illegal for US citizens.

This first phase of US policy toward Castro's Cuba had a solid footing in Cold War politics and was, in fact, derivative of America's 'Containment' policy, first enunciated in 1947 by the Truman Administration and continued under Eisenhower, albeit with nuanced differences. In its earliest manifestations, the embargo was primarily an attempt to pressure the radical and inexperienced leadership of Cuba to offer fair compensation for confiscated US-owned property and to squeeze the pockets of Castro and his supporters hard enough to halt their 'revolutionary fervour'.

The embargo was an open and declared policy, but doubts about its effectiveness surfaced even at the earliest stages, for a companion, and covert, plan to train Cuban exiles to launch an invasion against the Castro regime was put into action almost concurrently². The covert plan, in fact, was virtually the only aspect of early US-Cuba policy that had significant input from the Cuban community, which consisted at the time mostly of non-US citizens intent on returning to Cuba as quickly as possible. When the plan met with disastrous results at the Bay of Pigs on April 16, 1961, the Kennedy Administration turned to its Ivy League-trained foreign policy advisors to guide Cuba policy. That foreign policy elite guided President Kennedy during the tense moments of the October 1962 missile crisis and for the remainder of the tragically brief time that was left of his Administration.

Cuban exiles would remain at the margins, planning small, covert operations and receiving tepid support from Washington, through the rest of the 1960s. Probably the most significant event that decade for the Cuban exile community, which would leave a profound and enduring effect on US-Cuba relations, was a change of immigration policy. The passage of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, signed by President Johnson, gave Cubans the right to remain in the US and apply for permanent resident status within one year of arriving. The Act, in effect, provided a fast track to US citizenship for Cuban exiles. It became a cornerstone of the impressive growth of the Cuban community in South Florida and the basis for Cuban American participation in Florida politics. It eventually led to their significant impact on Washington politics, particularly after the 1980 presidential elections.

Jorge Mas Canosa and the CANF

Undoubtedly the most recognizable instrument of Cuban American politics, the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), is the brainchild of a driven, powerful and rich Cuban exile, Jorge Mas Canosa. Much has been written about Mas Canosa and CANF that I need not repeat in this brief analysis, but some facts are worth mentioning and some misperceptions about Mas Canosa and his organization are worth correcting.

Mas Canosa was above all pragmatic in his obsessive quest to drive Castro from power. He and his organization first rose to national prominence during the Reagan Administration, but he was equally prominent driving Cuba policy during the Clinton Administration. In other words, Mas Canosa was scrupulously bi-partisan. The facts are indisputable: in its 45-year history, the Cuban embargo has been supported to a greater or lesser extent by 10 US presidential administrations, four Democratic (Kennedy, Johnson, Carter and Clinton) and six Republican (Eisenhower, Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Bush Sr. and Bush Jr.). Moreover, its support in Congress has been bi-partisan, not only from the earliest, Cold War days, but more recently as well. Supporters of the embargo

² Prior to October 1960, in March 1960 Eisenhower had approved a covert plan against Castro that included propaganda tools and the organisation of a paramilitary force of Cuban exiles to invade the island.

include such ideological opposites as former Senator Jesse Helms, a Republican from North Carolina, and Senator Joseph Lieberman, Democrat from Connecticut, for example³. While it is true that the closest the United States got to a *rapprochement* with Castro's Cuba was during the Democratic Carter Administration, it was also the Democratic Clinton Administration that signed into law the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, commonly known as the Helms-Burton Act, which finally codified the embargo⁴.

Mas Canosa remained in firm control of CANF from its creation in 1981 until his death in 1997. The second most powerful ethnic political group after the American-Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC)⁵, CANF influence was felt on every piece of Cuba-related legislation during this period, with the organization deploying relentless propaganda to halt (with varying success) any executive branch initiative that could be construed as a lifting of the embargo. To highlight just a few initiatives, during the sixteen years that Mas Canosa was at the helm, CANF was an instrumental player behind the following pieces of legislation or policy:

- March 1982. The Reagan Administration re-establishes a travel ban that had been relaxed during the Carter Administration, and allows the 1977 fishing accord to lapse.
- May 1985. Radio Martí begins broadcasting after the 1983 passage of the Radio Broadcasting to Cuba Act. Mas Canosa is appointed chairman of the Presidential Advisory Board for Cuban Broadcasting.
- February 1990. US Congress passes the Television Broadcasting to Cuba Act, which establishes TV Martí. The US Government presently budgets approximately US\$23 million for radio and TV broadcasts to Cuba per year.
- October 1992. President George H.W. Bush signs the Cuba Democracy Act into law, which tightens the embargo precisely when Soviet President Gorbachev announces the end of Soviet subsidies to the Cuban economy.
- March 1996. President Clinton signs the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act into law, in the wake of the Cuban shooting down over international waters of two *Brothers to the Rescue* civilian aircraft.

Florida, Cuban Americans and Presidential Politics

Aided by good weather, plenty of cheap land and America's highly mobile workforce, Florida benefited from the twin economic booms of the Reagan and Clinton years to become a powerful factor in presidential politics. Its dramatic population growth since 1980 has given Florida a place of prominence in the 2004 presidential elections. Florida's 27 Electoral College votes places it ahead of other key 'battleground states' like Pennsylvania (21 votes) and Ohio (20 votes), and virtually in the same league as New York (31 votes) and Texas (34). Unlike New York and Texas, whose electoral votes are considered safely in the Democratic and Republican camp respectively, Florida's 27 votes are 'up for grabs.'

³ There are many more examples of politicians from both sides of the aisle supporting the policy, including most obviously Cuban American Representative Bob Menendez, Democrat from New Jersey, and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Lincoln Diaz-Balart, Cuban American representatives from Florida. Others include Indiana Republican Dan Burton and Democratic Senator Ernest Hollings from South Carolina.

⁴ For the previous 36 years, the embargo was not law *per se* but a set of executive branch orders and administrative regulations/decrees.

⁵ In terms of total contributions to political parties between 1989-2000, CANF ranks second only to AIPAC, far ahead of groups like Greek Americans, Italian Americans, and much further ahead than other Hispanic political groups in the US.

As is well known, the 2000 presidential election was decided in Florida by the razor-thin margin of 537 popular votes, out of nearly 6 million votes cast. As a prominent political force in the state, what the Cuban American community is saying and where it is leaning is thus of keen interest to both political parties, but of critical importance to the Republicans. Since Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, Florida has voted Republican in each presidential election except 1996⁶. The Cuban American vote has been a factor in all of these. Cuban American votes were solidly for Reagan in 1980 and 1984 and he showed due appreciation for their support by tightening the embargo.

In 1992, however, candidate Bill Clinton, running against incumbent President George Bush Sr., made a serious pitch for the Cuban American vote by declaring his support for the Cuban Democracy Act promoted by then Congressman Robert Torricelli, a prominent Democrat from New Jersey who was strongly supported by CANF. Clinton refused to concede Florida, making several trips to Miami to meet with the Cuban community to promise real action against Castro, as opposed to 12 years of what some Cuban Americans believed was tough Republican rhetoric and 'nothing to show for it'. Worried Republicans took note of a fund-raiser in Miami that raised US\$275,000 for the Clinton-Gore campaign and of the positive statement Mas Canosa, a professed Republican stalwart, made of Clinton. Faced with an opponent who was openly challenging him for the Cuban American vote, President Bush had little choice but to sign the controversial legislation into law in October, one month prior to the election⁷. Despite his defeat in the general election of 1992, Bush did manage to keep Florida in the Republican column by a margin of 86,000 votes and obtained an ultimately-not surprising 70% of the Cuban American vote.

Having made important inroads into solid Republican territory, President Clinton in his first term tiptoed carefully through the minefields of Cuban American politics. To be sure, he angered many Cuban Americans by following a policy of intercepting Cuban rafters in the Florida Straits and sending them to the US Naval Base in Guantanamo for processing, where some, but by no means all, of those picked up were determined to qualify for political asylum⁸. But Clinton in 1994 also cut off remittances to Cuba and, forced by the Cuban shoot down of two civilian aircraft, signed into law the very controversial Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act in March 1996. He thus was able to gain a solid 40% of the Cuban American vote in Florida in November 1996, sufficient to take the state away from Republican candidate Bob Dole.

Cuban Americans Challenged

The three-year period between 1997 and 2000 saw the biggest challenges to Cuban American hardliners since the creation of the CANF. Jorge Mas Canosa died in November 1997. Alberto Hernandez was chairman of CANF for one year, after which Jorge Mas Santos took charge of the Foundation, but no one had the power, personality and drive to match the elder Mas Canosa. CANF was also hurt politically by the October 1997 arrests

⁶ An often-overlooked fact by present day political pundits is that prior to 1980, the Cuban American community was largely Democratic. For example, Mas Canosa's first campaign contribution was to the 1974 Senate campaign of Democrat Richard Stone, who won that year only to lose the seat in 1980 to Republican Paula Hawkins. Other examples abound: Republican Congressmen Lincoln Diaz-Balart started political life as a Democrat. For an interesting look at Cuban Americans and the Bush family's role in influencing their party affiliation, see 'The Cuban Strategy: Can Jeb Bush Deliver the Florida Vote in November' by William Finnegan, *The New Yorker*, 29/VI/2004.

⁷ The Bush Administration objected *inter alia* to parts of the bill that would deny US aid to any country providing economic assistance to Cuba (eg, Russia) and to provisions barring US subsidiaries abroad from trading with Cuba.

⁸ This policy was the precursor to the 1999 Clinton refinement of the 1966 Cuban Adjustment Act, popularly known as the 'wet feet, dry feet' policy whereby those who reached US shores were immediately entitled to stay in the US but those intercepted even in a few feet of water were returned to Cuba.

in Puerto Rico of four Cuban Americans on charges of plotting to assassinate Castro during an official visit to Venezuela. This was the first small breach between moderates and the Cuban hardliners in Miami. But the biggest breach between 'mainstream' America and Cuban hardliners was the well-documented Elián González soap opera that played out on the world stage from Thanksgiving Day of 1999 until June of 2000. The division between Miami and the rest of the US became stark: the latter group was anti-Castro in general although they cared little about Cuba policy prior to the Elián González incident. What 'mainstream' Americans could not condone, however, was egregious conduct by radical groups who took the law into their own hands.

These incidents revealed a chink in the armour of the once all-powerful CANF that emboldened long-time critics of the embargo to step up pressure for change. Humanitarian groups, NGOs, farmers, foreign policy experts, business groups and Congressional leaders, some which had opposed the embargo since before the Torricelli legislation of 1992, others who were relatively recent opponents of the policy for varied reasons, coalesced to argue for change. Congress passed legislation authorising the sale of food and medicines to Cuba, albeit on a 'cash only' basis (a requirement that showed CANF not to be totally powerless)⁹. Perhaps more worrying for CANF than these Washington Beltway and farm states developments is that the Cuban community in Miami no longer appears monolithic. There is an important rift between those who support travel to Cuba to visit relatives (and who provide the vital remittances that keep their relatives, and the Cuban economy, afloat) and the hardliners, who have split from CANF to form the Cuban Liberty Council¹⁰.

The 2000 Presidential Election and Beyond

Both the Democrats and Republicans see possibilities for 2004 in the 2000 electoral results in Florida. John Kerry can point to the Cuban American strongholds of Dade and Broward counties and see that despite an 81% Cuban vote against Gore, the Democrats actually carried both counties by comfortable margins. In other words, non-Cuban Hispanics, who typically vote for Democrats, now outnumber Cubans on their own turf. It thus would seem that a candidate running on an anti-embargo ticket could safely assume that the Cuban vote has been nullified and, indeed, overwhelmed by voters who support the lifting of the embargo. But Kerry, like Bush, is sounding tough on the embargo. Why?

The answer lies in the fact that President Bush was elected in 2000 on the basis of Florida's Electoral College votes, a state he won by the barest of margins of 537 votes. Candidate Kerry does not need the 40% Cuban American vote Clinton obtained in 1996; he needs just 538 more than Gore obtained in 2000. Democratic campaign strategists are counting on the fact that while sounding tough on the embargo may not cost Kerry much outside Florida, it could gain him more than a few votes in Florida's Cuban community, particularly given Cuban American discontent with the Administration's turnover of 12 hijackers to Cuban authorities in 2003 and the perceived rift created in the community by the policies adopted from the report of the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba¹¹.

⁹ This partial lifting of the embargo was supported by, among many others, then Senator John Ashcroft of Missouri, who is now Attorney General.

¹⁰ 'The most significant difference between CANF and the new Cuban Liberty Council is in their respective attitudes toward internal Cuban dissidents. The foundation has followed the trajectory of the wider community in that it now believes change from the island must come from within, whereas the council generally questions the credibility of domestic dissidents', from Lisa Weinman, 'Washington's Irrational Cuba Policy,' *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2004, p. 27.

¹¹ The Commission was created in October 2003 and included members of all Cabinet level agencies. Its chairman was Secretary of State Powell and Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega oversaw day-to-day operations. The Commission Report and recommendations were recently issued and the implementation of the policy recommendations went into effect on June 30, 2004. The new regulations need no further commentary given extensive worldwide media coverage.

A similar rationale applies to the Republicans. The Cuban American community is split on the new measures, but those who are angriest at being denied family visits are the more recent arrivals, and thus the least likely to have gained citizenship and the right to vote. Another plausible calculation, as explained by a Republican strategist, is that with the country so evenly divided, the party that motivates the highest number of voters from its 'base' will win. Thus, according to the strategist, motivating hard-line Cubans to get out and vote by toughening the embargo is a more effective electoral strategy than angling for independent voters and running the risk of angering your 'base'.

Whither the Embargo?

What does this mean for the continued existence of the embargo? It is hard to say, as predicting the demise of the embargo has been as fraught with errors as predicting the demise of the Castro regime to which it is inextricably linked. Here, however, are a few factors to consider that apply equally whether a Republican or a Democrat administration is in office in the next four years:

- The embargo is one aspect of US-Cuba policy which is intended to encourage a rapid, peaceful transition to a democratic government characterized by open markets and respect for human rights. Even if the embargo is lifted (and that would mean amending or repealing the Helms-Burton Act) the US will continue to insist by other policy means that Cuba respect human rights and that Cubans be given the right to elect their own government in free and fair elections. Other aspects of the policy, including migration and security issues, undoubtedly will remain in place.
- Fidel Castro remains as eccentric and unpredictable as ever. An incident similar to the Mariel boatlift of 1980 or the *Brothers to the Rescue* shoot-down of 1996, each possibly timed during an election year, could again bring a halt to any prospect of loosening the embargo.
- Barring any bizarre act from Cuba, Congressional pressure against the embargo will remain. Since 1999, the House has passed amendments to the Department of the Treasury's Appropriations bill that prohibits the department from enforcing the embargo. In 2003, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved the Freedom to Travel to Cuba Act that would lift the travel ban. The bill did not pass, but is bound to surface again in the next Congress.
- US business and agro-business will continue to press the White House, particularly in a soft economy where export markets for US products are sorely needed. Energy companies will pay attention if significant oil reserves are found on Cuban territory.
- Arguments against lifting the embargo (giving an unrepentant Castro an economic windfall, etc) are being met with counter-arguments by some foreign policy experts and some military and homeland security professionals who worry about the lack of a framework for an exchange of data necessary to protect US shores against new threats.

These factors and others will have to be weighed not only by Washington but also by the Cuban American community if it wants to remain central in the policy process. The rise of Puerto Rican and other Hispanics in Florida will challenge the predominance of Cubans in local politics and, by extension, in presidential elections every four years. Cuban Americans have not ignored these developments. A safe bet is that the Cuban American

leadership will play a very constructive role in shaping a future policy conducive to a free, democratic and market-oriented Cuba.

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